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SUBJECT: PRIME MINISTER STRESSES FIGHT AGAINST CORRUPTION WITH DONORS

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Classified by Charge d'Affaires Samuel C. Laeuchli for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶11. (C) Prime Minister Zongo met with the Chiefs of Mission from donor countries and organizations on October 16th and 17th. In a private session on the 16th, Zongo was extremely open in accepting criticism of his government's progress on key economic issues, and instructed select Ministers to move forward. At a public session on the 17th, Zongo was somewhat more combative, pushing back on what he seemed to consider unfair criticism. On both occasions, Zongo stressed the fight against corruption as the basis for progress on the economic front. Clearly Zongo continues to make the anti-corruption effort one of the key elements of his government. End Summary.

DONORS RAISE CONCERN

¶12. (C) Prime Minister Zongo met in a restricted meeting with Chiefs of Mission from donor countries and organizations on October 16th to discuss a variety of issues. This was one of a regular series of meetings the PM holds with this group to engage in frank discussion. The format was structured to allow donors to raise concerns, which they had shared in writing with Zongo in advance.

¶13. (C) Most of the issues raised fell into the realm of economic development and good governance. Although donors commented positively on the significant improvements the country has recently registered in surveys done by Transparency International and the World Bank's "Doing Business" indicators, they stressed that much remains to be done.

¶14. (C) The World Bank and UNDP began the discussions with a critique of the public procurement/public tender system, arguing that these areas were not sufficiently transparent and need to be improved. This was followed by a criticism of the judicial system, particularly the slow pace of rendering decisions. Other areas of concern included problems with the business environment, corruption, and gender equality.

THE PRIME MINISTER RESPONDS

¶15. (C) Zongo was remarkably open in his responses to the criticism. He had assembled four of his key ministers (Finance, Health, Justice and Civil Service) to help answer difficult questions, but also, it appeared, to make sure that they were getting the full flavor of the donors' comments. Although he took on board the criticism, Zongo

pleaded for time to work on some of the issues. For example, he stressed that in terms of public tenders, he had instituted the Autorite de Regulation des Marches Publics (ARMP), a new oversight body that includes members of the public and private sectors as well as civil society. However, he pointed out, this system was only established in July and would need time to become fully operational.

¶ 16. (C) In a similar vein, Zongo said that he is working to improve the judiciary, but special training will be needed for magistrates. Many magistrates, he said, are poorly equipped to deal with complex commercial cases due to a lack of experience and training in the field. New magistrates are needed, Zongo argued, who have economic backgrounds. They will also need specialized training to be effective. Improvements in this area will take time, and he will ask donors to assist with the training requirements.

¶ 17. (C) Zongo did spend considerable time stressing the importance of the fight against corruption. All his other efforts in the realm of good governance would mean little, he claimed, if corruption could not be brought under control. He was very direct in speaking of corruption, not hiding behind euphemisms and polite phrases. It appeared to be Zongo's intention to make it clear to both donors and his own ministers how important this issue is to him.

PUBLIC CRITICISM LESS WELCOME

¶ 18. (C) At a public mid-year review of Burkina Faso's anti-poverty strategy the next day, donors reiterated the same criticisms more forcefully and centered more specifically on poverty reduction. The EU's Ambassador pointed out that, in spite of economic growth in the country, poverty had actually increased from 42.1 percent in 2006 to 42.6 percent in 2007. He also pointed out that although some of the economic and business indicators had improved; others such as the

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Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth rate had stagnated or even deteriorated. In general, the donors' remarks were fairly negative in tone.

¶ 19. (C) Reacting to this negativity, and perhaps to the fact that this event was being filmed for television, the Prime Minister refuted the criticism. For example, he said that even the World Bank had predicted an increase in poverty worldwide as a result of rising energy and food prices. "How could one expect," he said, "Burkina Faso to buck such a global trend that has nothing to do with local policies?" He also pointed out that his government's pleas for help in certain poverty reduction activities, particularly in the agricultural sector, had been "ignored" by donors.

¶ 10. (C) When it came to corruption, Zongo made many of the same points publicly that he had stressed the day before in private. He clearly wanted to emphasize to the public audience that he is serious about the fight against corruption and that all other improvements in governance depend on this point.

COMMENT

¶ 11. (C) Zongo conveys the impression of someone who is working hard on real problems in an open and transparent manner. Particularly in private, he took on board criticism and did not shy away from tough issues and straight talk. His inclusion of key Ministers gave a sense that he would make the government work for visible improvements. In public he was more aware of his domestic audience and constituency, and did not want to appear "bullied" by donors. Through all of this, Zongo highlighted the fight against corruption as a central theme for his government and as a core element of his own legitimacy.

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